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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 000926

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: PROGRESS ON INTERNAL SITUATION: DAS YAMAMOTO MEETS  
WITH DETAINED CUD OPPOSITION LEADERS

REF: A. A)ADDIS 897 B)ADDIS 667

[1](#)B. C)05 ADDIS 4202

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. For over two hours on March 31 DAS Yamamoto, Charge and DCM met with five members of the detained leadership of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD): Berhanu Nega, Dr. Yakob Hailemariam, Hailu Shawel, Gezachew Shiferaw, and Mesfin Woldemariam. The detainees, who appeared in relatively good health and made no complaints about their conditions of detention, expressed deep concern for the future of the country, stating that they feared armed conflict. The country needs democracy, reconciliation and dialogue, they said, and they reiterated their commitment to peaceful change. They expect their trial to take several years in a judicial process that is not free from ruling party interference, they said. They are disappointed that the U.S. has not called for their release but rather for a quick and fair trial. DAS Yamamoto told the detainees that the U.S. is committed to their release as a fundamental condition to long term stability and democracy. The detainees listened to the charge's suggestions on reducing the political tension by agreeing to be more cooperative within a democratic process and by not opposing engagement of their members in the Parliament and City Hall. While the detainees remain opposed to political engagement, Prime Minister Meles is making a good faith effort to engage the parliamentary opposition. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) During DAS Yamamoto's call on Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on March 30 (reftel), charge requested and received permission to visit the detainees, the first such permission given to USG representatives. The next day, March 31, DAS Yamamoto, Charge and DCM met with five detainees at Kaliti Prison on the outskirts of Addis. Guards brought the detainees to a small office for the meetings but did not monitor or restrict the meetings in any way.

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MEETING WITH BERHANU NEGA  
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[1](#)3. (C) The USG group first met individually with Dr. Berhanu Nega (mayor-elect of Addis Ababa) who looked well and joked that he preferred prison to the six month post-election period when he said he was harassed and followed. He said that he was being held in a hall with some 300 other prisoners, but separate from the other detainees. DAS Yamamoto began the conversation by referring to his testimony at the congressional hearing on Ethiopia that was held on

March 28. Dr. Berhanu said that he had heard this on Voice of America but that he was "terribly worried" about the country, which he described as on the threshold of military conflict. The country needs reconciliation and dialogue, he said; the so-called "judicial process" is hardly that. The charge responded by saying that political engagement is needed by working with elected members of parliament. This Dr. Berhanu rejected, saying that no improvement was possible as the ruling party is "vicious, full of trickery and lies." The problem, he said, is the "control-freak mentality" of the current regime which is "driven by hatred." He said that the CUD is not interested in who is in power but rather in establishing a real, functioning democracy, and in what will happen in five years (when the mandate of the current government will run out). In response to DAS Yamamoto's question on who in the opposition the USG should be talking to, Dr. Berhanu stated that the CUD should be recognized as a legitimate political party and that discussion should take place on democratization and peaceful change. DAS Yamamoto stated that the USG concern is the detainees and the need for political reform in order for Ethiopia to develop and move forward. The charge said that the US and other partners are working to try to reduce the tension as the trial goes forward. The US and the EU are working with the opposition on institution building and a more effective Parliament and to create a CUDP that can effectively take control and run Addis Ababa. Dr. Berhanu responded that the detainees would not be party to a charade. Among the charging documents are several "plants" and a forgery; nothing, he said, justifies the government's actions of June 8 and November 2005 (when violent confrontations between demonstrators and law enforcement and military forces took place.) When DAS Yamamoto raised the possibility of clemency after the

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completion of the trial, Dr. Berhanu was dismissive, saying that the detainees want the right to participate in the political process. Dr. Berhanu said that people are upset with U.S. policy in Ethiopia and accused the charge of helping to create an alternate leadership for CUD. Both DAS Yamamoto and the charge reiterated that the USG is pushing for political reform and for the eventual release of the detainees so that they can again play a leadership role in the political process.

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MEETING WITH HAILU SHAWEL, YAKOB HAILEMARIAM AND GIZACHEW SHIFERAW  
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14. (C) The USG group next met with three detainees together: Dr. Yakob Hailemariam, former prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha; Hailu Shawel, CUD Chairman; and Engineer Gezachew Shiferaw, member of the CUD executive committee. (Note. In response to a query on his health, Hailu Shawel said that his eyes are improving and that he is having some therapy for his back, although he believes he needs a specialist for his back. End note.) Dr. Yacob explained that according to Ethiopian law the detainees cannot be released on bail, given the charges against them. The trial itself, he said, will take at least three years, as the prosecution intends to call some 363 witnesses. In fact, he said, the detainees are not happy with the U.S. position which calls for a fair trial to proceed quickly. By contrast, he said, the EU has called for the unconditional release of the detainees. According to Hailu Shawel, democracy has been systematically demolished, with political structures destroyed. The political gains of the four years leading up to the May 2005 elections have been erased with the mass arrests and killings following the elections, he said. DAS Yamamoto emphasized the U.S. concern for political reform and the respect of human rights.

15. (C) The charge said that work is underway to move the process forward, citing follow-up to the US-EU post-election statement. Is it possible, she asked, that the detainees

could engage in the judicial process and make a statement on what is best for the country? Hailu stated, "we are not criminals. You can't criminalize politics and get democracy out of it, he said, and therefore we are not going to participate. Hailu alleged that the government plans to use forged documents as evidence at the trial. Liars are being trained to testify against us, he said, and if they refuse, they are jailed. The court case is absurd, with everything is in the hands of the government, Hailu said; we have nothing left to give. In response to charge's suggestion that a way forward is to engage more, he said that the U.S. is an ally but it is not listening, which undermines U.S. interests. You are making a playing field for terrorists, he accused, saying that people are aroused all across Ethiopia, and predicting that more will die. According to Hailu, the regime will tolerate only weak opposition parties, such as the EPRDF (ruling party) affiliates that are established in regions throughout Ethiopia.

16. (C) DAS Yamamoto reminded the detainees that the U.S. condemned the violence of June 8 and November. Your continued detention, he added, is detrimental to the political process. Dr. Yacob said that the only way out of this political impasse for Meles is to reduce charges and grant bail; however, pardon after the completion of the trial is not an option as the detainees would be finished politically, Dr. Yacob said. Only Engineer Gizachew and Dr. Yacob indicated some willingness to respond positively to the charge's suggestion that the detainees help to reduce political tension by acknowledging positive changes that have taken place over the past five months.

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MEETING WITH MESFIN WOLDEMARIAM  
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17. (C) Finally the USG group met with human rights activist (and former Fulbright scholar) Prof. Mesfin Woldemariam who walked slowly with a cane but said that he is one the few who is not seeking medical attention. DAS Yamamoto said that he had seen the professor's daughter (Mekdes) at the March 28 hearing where she testified as well. Prof. Mesfin said that he had heard his daughter on a Voice of America broadcast.

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"I don't know why I'm here," he began, stating that he has never advocated violence nor even capital punishment. We're waiting to see what happens, he said, as all moderate voices have been stifled; they are in jail or in exile. According to Prof. Mesfin, the only avenue left is to "go to the woods," as the Tigray People's Liberation Front did, as Ethiopian history is one of wars. These last years have been an experiment on peaceful struggle, he said, which raised the expectations of the people. There was hope, but now this has been crushed; there are no hopeful signs at present, he said, with no freedom of expression and the media not covering what is going on in Ethiopia. Only a political solution is possible, Prof. Mesfin said, as people to need to talk and to compromise. He dismissed the "so-called judicial process," stating that Meles does as he wants and tampers with the system as he wishes. The PM has "evil counsel," and the ruling party was "wounded" by the election, Mesfin said; all they understand is "put you under my boot."

18. (C) The charge said that there is now some flexibility on the part of the government, such as allowing U.S. diplomats to visit the detainees, and that a political solution may be possible after the trial. If the CUD forms itself anew as a political party, she added, the political process will be able to move forward (as it did when Mandela was imprisoned in South Africa) and it would be there when the detainees are released. Prof. Mesfin replied that in Ethiopia, a religious country, there is "religiosity in politics," which allows for no compromise. Could there have been magnanimity in post-election period, he asked rhetorically. Neither side was able to do this, Prof. Mesfin

said. How can we build confidence with the ruling party that lacks confidence in itself? Prof. Mesfin said that the CUD leadership imprisoned would eventually get out, but "into what?"

¶9. (C) In fact, he added, those of us in prison are better off than Meles who has two thorny problems: Eritrea and the internal situation. The internal situation must be disentangled from Eritrea which will exploit the situation and try to force armed struggle. Prof. Mesfin concluded that Ethiopia needs to look forward, to see how to bring about change in "an honest political situation". All have a stake in this country, Prof. Mesfin said, and we must focus on the future, with confidence; we do not believe in armed struggle; rather, we need to learn political rather than armed combat to bring about change.

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PM Meles on the opposition  
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¶10. (C) During DAS Yamamoto's call on Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on March 30 (reftel A), charge stated the future of the country lies in the government's and opposition's abilities to move forward and engage in the democratic process. The process now is "stuck" because of the continued detention of the opposition leadership which has strong support from the diaspora. Recognizing that both sides need to respect the rule of law unconditionally, charge asked if there might be a legal opening to resolve this matter. PM Meles said that once the trial had run its course it may be possible, taking into consideration the detainees behavior during the trial, to consider some sort of clemency, although this is really an issue for the president of the country and the minister of justice. He stated categorically that there is no quid pro quo and there will be no negotiations with the detainees. Their release is a "red line," he stated. On CUDP efforts to reform or reconstitute itself, the PM said that the CUDP must meet the legal requirements of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), adding that the courts may ultimately ban the CUDP constituent parties.

¶11. (C) DAS Yamamoto said the March 28th congressional hearing emphasized that dialogue is needed for the political process to move forward--dialogue with the opposition as well as dialogue with the diaspora on issues of famine, human rights, political reform, etc. The PM responded that the CUD (detainees and diaspora) wants to damage the image of the government in order to threaten donor funding and limit resource flows so that the government will fall. Ethiopia should have received USD 1.6 billion in development assistance this year, Meles said, but only USD 270 million has come in. However, we will weather this storm, he said,

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as additional funds are delayed but expected to come.

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Comment  
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¶12. (C) This is the first time U.S. government personnel have had access to any of the "Hailu Shawel" detainees since their November 2005 incarceration. Not surprisingly, they continue to resist engagement with the government on finding a way forward, in part due to support from the diaspora who also advocate non-engagement and because this has always been their position, even prior to the November riots and their detention. Their position is simply we won the elections and we will only participate in the democratic institution if our previous conditions are met. One of the conditions now is their release from jail. We do not believe, as some of the detainees stated, that the country is on the verge of armed struggle. We do see the next two years as critical for significant progress in both economic and democratic development. Our message will continue to be that engagement

and commitment are the way forward in the post-election political process to develop democratic institutions and processes. On April 5, charge met with local press for an on-the-record briefing and called for support for the opposition taking control of Addis Ababa and forming the new CUDP. She also reiterated the USG commitment to the detained CUD and civil society leaders and for their release so that the democratic process can move forward.

¶13. (C) Meles is making a good faith effort to engage the opposition. For the first time Meles provided some hope that the detainees might be pardoned; however, this will greatly depend on whether they cooperate with the judicial process and stop trying to block the engagement of CUD MPs and city councillors in government institutions. The Meles initiated dialogue with the parliamentary opposition--United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF) and Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM)--is producing the release of prisoners in Oromiya and a promised joint visit by the ruling party EPRDF, OFDM and UEDF to the region. Meles said this dialogue would be extended to United Ethiopia Democratic Party-Medhin (UEDP-Medhin). He has also given additional time for elected CUD representatives to organize themselves as a political party and extended the deadline for the entry of the opposition into city hall.

¶13. (U) DAS Yamamoto did not clear this cable.  
HUDDLESTON